

Lay Synod Superintendency

In 2008 the Waikato-Waiariki Synod sent the following Notice of Motion to Methodist Conference:

“We believe that lay and ordained have theological, spiritual and pastoral skills and experience required for the position of Synod Superintendent. Therefore we ask that Conference allow a Synod to nominate a lay person to be the Synod Superintendent.”

I would like to reaffirm this proposal.

To reacquaint myself with the roles and responsibilities of the Methodist Synod, I went to the Methodist Law Book.¹ From there I understand that the role of the Synod is to exercise governance and a **corporate episcopacy** .

[The word “episcopacy” is generally translated as “oversight”, but it comes with 2,000 years of historical and theological baggage. How much of this baggage do we carry into Methodism?]

The function of the Synod is to:

- foster and maintain district and congregational strategies
- implement Connexional decisions
- act as a forum for both lay and ordained
- keep records

The role of Synod Superintendent, as I understand the description, is one of governance, management and pastoral care.

There are three questions which occur to me.

1. In our current practice as Methodists, is there some confusion between the call to ordination – which is to a life centred around the word, the sacraments and pastoral care - and the exercise of governance in the church?

The Methodist Church invites both lay and ordained people, appropriately skilled, to be part of the governance of the Church.

2. In practical terms, how does a Synod exercise *corporate episcopacy*?

My understanding of this is that the authority lies with the Synod, not the Superintendent. It is the Synod, not the Superintendent who acts as the “episcopate” . [I think we need to walk gently, if we don’t want to turn our Synod Superintendents into de facto bishops.]

3. The third is a whole cluster of questions. What is “full connexion”? Who is able to be in full connexion within the Methodist Church? To what extent is this concept a legacy from English law? How might it be interpreted more usefully in the oversight of New Zealand Methodism?

Being ‘in connexion’ is used to express the spiritual, pastoral and institutional relationships we have one with another as congregations, as synods and as a national

¹ Laws and Regulations of the Methodist Church of New Zealand, Te Haahi Weteriana o Aotearoa Revised Edition, 2007. Section 4, subsections 2,3,8

church. It is also used to delineate the lines of oversight and responsibility. Connexionalism, then, has a spiritual, a pastoral and a governance dimension. It involves both lay and ordained. However, can a lay person be received into full connexion within the Methodist Church?

Who are we as Methodists in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Amongst other things, we are a bi-cultural church, we promote equality, and we model a partnership between lay and ordained.

We acknowledge the difference in the roles and callings between lay and ordained, but how do we acknowledge equality?

James Stuart, in his book, *The John Wesley Code : Finding a Faith that Matters*² has a chapter entitled "Consider Expedience", in which he points out that 'Wesley often departed from established Anglican practice when the necessity of a situation required it.' [p.23] When he felt called to preach in the open air, Wesley defied the bishop and preached. When there was a need for ordained ministers in the Americas to administer the sacraments and Anglican priests were not welcome in the new republic, Wesley ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey.

Should we not take note of John Wesley's "expediency" and ask - What works? What best expresses our understanding of who we are as Methodists in 21 Century?

If we accept a lay President, why not accept a lay Superintendent? Both have a pastoral role and a governance role in the church.

We know that the Methodist Church appoints lay people to roles of governance and we know that all Christians are called to exercise pastoral care of one another. Would oversight from a lay President be different in kind from that of a lay Superintendent?

There are two great advantages in accepting lay superintendency.

The first is the opportunity to use people with appropriate skills. Is it better to have a highly qualified lay person or an inexperienced ordained person leading the Synod? Separated superintendency allows presbyters to minister in Parishes without the added burden of governance and oversight. Lay superintendents would add another aspect of flexibility to this.

The second is that of expediency. With our reducing numbers of experienced presbyters in parish ministry, the church is already having difficulty in finding presbyters to minister to even their most critical parishes. To appoint a presbyter as a separated superintendent is to remove that person from a parish. To appoint a person as Synod Superintendent when she or he may also be superintending more than one parish is a huge burden.

The proposal, of course, is not without problems.

It is not a model that would be acceptable in all Synods. There are other aspects of our church, both in governance and theology, which are not acceptable to some Synods. We

² Stuart, James *The John Wesley Code : Finding a Faith that Matters*. Wellington, Philip Garside, 2008

offer it as one model, to be used where the Synod decides that it is appropriate and necessary.

We acknowledge the long training and collegial relationships of our ordained presbyters. There are also well-trained lay people in the church, with theological degrees and life experience of working in pastoral and governance roles.

There is the issue of accountability. There would need to be some clear understanding around Covenant, Code of Ethics and full connexion.

Relationships with other churches could also be seen as an issue. Would other churches accept collegial relationships with a lay Superintendent? That question would need to be balanced against the necessity to attend to our own Methodist ethos and the ongoing welfare of our particular communities.

No – John Wesley did not appoint Lay Superintendents to his districts; but he did pave the way for expedient, practical solutions to ecclesiastical problems where and when they arose. The call of the Gospel and the needs of the people were always stronger than the laws of the church.

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